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THE MYTHICAL SERPENTS  
OF  
HEBREW LITERATURE.

*Thesis*

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## THE MYTHICAL SERPENTS OF HEBREW LITERATURE.

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There seems to be no limit to human credulity as to the forms which animals may assume, or the attributes which they may possess.<sup>1</sup> Three stages in the development of fabulous creatures may be traced: The animal is first credited with certain powers it does not, and probably cannot have;<sup>2</sup> then animals altogether fabulous, but still belonging to a definite and well-known class, are supposed to exist;<sup>3</sup> and the third stage is to imagine monsters of no certain class, but possessing parts and attributes of several, and all greatly exaggerated. Various kinds of these last-named creatures, popularly called dragons, have been believed in, but with rare exceptions the basal form has been the serpent or the crocodile, and they have often been known as serpents or even as worms.<sup>4</sup> They dwelt in secluded or desert spots, and were of hideous shape with glowing eyes, fiery breath and impenetrable scales. Their hunger was insatiable, man being their favorite food, and young, beautiful maidens seemingly their greatest delicacy.

When primitive man began to seek causes for the phenomena of nature, these monsters being already the most hideous things he had imagined, such phenomena as were regarded as evil came naturally to be conceived of as being the work of some dragon of similar form. The first thing to suggest the monster serpent was probably the eclipse, which being rare is the more mysterious, and it also attacks the moon, which is the great friend of the savage because it lights up the dreaded darkness. The shadow creeping gradually over the face of the moon must be the work of some monster of evil who has seized it and is gradually swallowing it as a serpent swallows its victim.<sup>5</sup> The lightning flashing across the sky suggested the winding snake, the thunder cloud creeping up as if seeking to blot out the sun became a monster, and the long extended rainbow looked like a serpent stretched across the heavens.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Ashton, "Curious Creatures in Zoölogy."

<sup>2</sup> Some people still believe that the ordinary rat has foreknowledge and can tell when a ship it infests is to sink.

<sup>3</sup> As, for example, the Basilisk, the Lamb-Tree, and the Barnacle Goose.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the "Laidly (*i.e.*, loathely) Worms" of Britain. This name is probably the Old English term for these monsters. Cf. German, *Lindwurm*, Serpent Worm.

<sup>5</sup> In China, as in ancient Egypt, during an eclipse the people make all sorts of hideous noises to frighten off the dragon.

<sup>6</sup> In India the rainbow is believed to be a gigantic serpent blown up to the sky from underground; in Persia it is called the "celestial serpent." (Crooke, *Folklore of India*, II:144).

Then, as man began to perceive the eternal warfare between good and evil, the causes of evil ceased to be conceived of as simple dragons, and became evil spirits in that shape. Darkness and dawn, summer and winter, and all things moral and physical were part of this titanic struggle. Finally it was an easy transition to apply the names and tales of dragons to historical events and persons.

Water has always been a great gathering point for the myth, for its qualities are so mysterious, and it is so essential to life. Every spring was regarded as the possession of some being, every stream had its spirit or was personified as a god.<sup>7</sup> The great sea especially impressed its draconic qualities upon mankind. It is so treacherous and merciless, so full of mystery, and power, and ever-changing moods, that maritime peoples came to regard it as a living thing and a being not always or generally friendly to man. Its continual raging against its shores, and especially in bays where flood tides are common, the waves coming in with "their cruel, crawling foam," so persistently trying to redeem the land to itself, and devastate the world, made it appear as the enemy of mankind and therefore of the gods and of good. The sea thus became among some peoples a great dragon and the symbol of evil.

There are several names and many references in the Old Testament which clearly show that the Hebrews, like the rest of mankind, believed in the same kind of monsters and developed the same myths. The generic name in Hebrew for the "dragon" is תַּנִּין, the extended thing, a name which may be applied to any large animal of the exact character, size, and shape of which the speaker is ignorant (Gen. 1: 21; Exod. 7: 9; Ps. 91: 13). In Deut. 32: 33 the tannin is a fabulous monster; in Ps. 148: 7, Job 7: 12, it is the dragon of the Deep;<sup>8</sup> and in Isa. 27: 1, 59: 9, Ps. 74: 13, it has an historical reference.

A closely allied word to this is תַּנִּיִּם (with same root meaning, but always plural, once feminine *tanoth*, Mal. 1: 3). The tanim are jackals, but the word is several times employed as a synonym of tannin, probably through clerical error.<sup>9</sup> In Ezek. 29: 3, 32: 2, the tannim is Egypt or Pharaoh, the Crocodile Dragon; and in Isa. 35: 7, Jer. 9: 10, Ps. 44: 20, it seems to be nothing more than a fabulous monster.

<sup>7</sup> The Nile God is pictured as inhabiting a chamber formed by the outline of a serpent, with a small opening through which he pours the waters. In Cushing's *Zuñi Folktales* there is a tale of the Serpent of the Sea, the spirit of the waters who appeared in serpent form and to whom all springs belonged.

<sup>8</sup> Güntel's *Schöpfung und Chaos* deals very exhaustively with the myth of Tiamat, the dragon of the Deep, and references to it in the Old Testament. He seeks, however, to find it in too many places, forgetful of the fact that there were other mythic beings believed in by the Hebrews.

<sup>9</sup> In Lam. 4: 13 tannin is written by mistake for tannim. The Kethibh gives the correct reading.



The שָׂרָף מְעוֹפֵף (Isa. 14: 29), the fiery flying serpent, is simply an imaginary reptile, with nothing of the myth in it.<sup>10</sup> The Fleeing Serpent (נָחָשׁ בָּרִיחַ, Isa. 27: 1, Job 26: 13) and the Tortuous Serpent (נָחָשׁ עֲקֻלָּתוֹךְ, Isa. 27: 1) are descriptive names of the Sky-serpent, the dragon of the eclipse and the storm cloud.

The name Leviathan (לִיָּוִתָן root, to bind or coil, cf. לִיָּה, a wreath or garland, Prov. 1: 9) is given at first to the ordinary monster of the popular imagination, and the name shows how natural it was to attribute to these the serpent form. In Ps. 104: 26 the name is used as a collective for the monsters of the sea, the "great tanninim" of Gen. 1: 21,<sup>11</sup> and in Job 40: 25-41: 26 the crocodile is described under this title.<sup>12</sup> The name is also given to the sky-serpent (Isa. 27: 1) and to the dragon of the Ocean (Ps. 74: 13, 14). In the latter it is referred to as many-headed.<sup>13</sup>

תְּהוֹמוֹת is exactly the same word as Tiamat, the name of the Babylonian dragon of the waters, and comes from the root הָוָה, to roar. Perhaps because of its mythological significance in the Babylonian folklore, the Old Testament writers seldom employed it with a mythic meaning. Only once (Ps. 48: 7) does the word refer to fabulous creatures, and there the *tehomoth* are sea-monsters. In other places the name means simply the sea and its waves (Exod. 15: 5, and often). The *tehomoth* of Deut. 8: 7 are the water-courses or springs, and in Deut. 33: 13 *tehom* is the subterranean sea which feeds these. The expression "*tehomoth* of the earth" (Ps. 71: 20) seems to have been a proverbial saying meaning the opposite of the "heights of heaven."

The name Rahab (רָהַב) is usually explained to mean arrogance or capaciousness. But it may be a foreign word Hebraized, and as its principal reference is to Egypt, it is possibly Egyptian, and from some word or name compounded with Ra, the name of the supreme sun-god.<sup>14</sup> In Ps. 87: 4 Rahab is used as a name for Egypt, but in all other instances of its use there is a mythic reference, and Rahab is almost always the equivalent of Tiamat.<sup>15</sup>

The Behemoth of Job 40: 5-24 is the hippopotamus. (The name is the plural of the word for cattle, and may mean "the colossal

<sup>10</sup> The belief in winged serpents was universal.

<sup>11</sup> The parallel to Leviathan is אַנְיֹת, ships. Güntel would read אִימֹת, terrors, or terror-causing things, which gives a better parallel.

<sup>12</sup> Arabs call the crocodile Pharaoh.

<sup>13</sup> Belief in a many-headed serpent is quite common. Cf. Apoc. 12: 3ff. 13: 1.

<sup>14</sup> Hapi was the name of the Nile god, and Egypt might be said to be the land of Ra and Hapi.

<sup>15</sup> The word *rehabim* in Ps. 40: 5 has a purely moral reference. It has no connection with the name Rahab, but is probably the plural of the Hebrew word to which the foreign name has been assimilated in form. Some take the word to be applied to false gods, as is *shedim*, demons, in Deut. 32: 7.

creature." It may be a Hebrew form of a foreign name, and many regard it as being from the Egyptian *P-ehe-mou*, "water-ox," but this is objected to because such a name has nowhere yet been found.)<sup>16</sup> Gunkel would find in the Leviathan and Behemoth of Job fabulous and perhaps mythic monsters, because of their connection with the water, and because there are attributes ascribed to them that no natural animal could possess, but there appears in the passage nothing more than the exaggeration of poetry and distance.

Isa. 30: 6a, "the oracle concerning the Behemoth of the south country," is evidently a gloss or marginal note explanatory of the beasts mentioned in this peculiar verse. Vv. 6, 7 ought not to be separated, for no new prophecy begins here. Delitzsch, however, understands by Behemoth the hippopotamus, and Duhm would read "Oracle of the desert (changing *h* to *sh*) of the Negeb."

One of the most catholic myths the world has known is the Babylonian legend of Tiamat, the great dragon of the Deep, the enemy of the gods. Tiamat of frightful mien was before all things, even before deity. When the gods appeared she was enraged, for if they were to rule, her unquestioned sway must end. She sought, therefore, to destroy the gods, who cowered in terror, until Merodach, son of Ea, the good god, arose and offered to be their champion. In the momentous struggle, which is most graphically told in story and picture, Merodach was victorious; the dragon was slain and her "helpers" scattered.

In ancient times the Persian Gulf extended much farther north than it now does, and what is now Central Babylonia was then its shore. Moreover, one of the dangers of this low-lying land was the overflowing of the Euphrates, which was a great source of loss, especially before the system of canalization was begun. Thus the water, the Deep, obtained great prominence among the people as a source of evil, and the myth of Tiamat emerged. This myth in time became more abstract, and was applied to any combat, as between light and darkness, right and wrong, the country and its enemies.

The story spread among all Semitic people, and into the nations which came in contact with them, and as among these the sea was not so dangerous, Tiamat became identified with the sun myths and

<sup>16</sup> In later Jewish mythology Leviathan and Behemoth were great monsters created in the beginning male and female. Had they been allowed to bring forth young the world would soon have been destroyed by them. God therefore destroyed the female Leviathan, and kept the male for his amusement (cf. Ps. 104: 26). According to another version of the myth, God forbade the angel to kill Leviathan, and made the male Leviathan and Behemoth fight with one another until both were killed. (This conflict became also a cosmic struggle, like the dragon stories of other peoples.) The flesh of these monsters is to be the food of the righteous in the "eternity to come." (Weber, *Altsynagogalen Palästinischen Theologie*, 195, 384). In mediæval times Behemoth was one of the chief demons. Jeanne d'Arc was officially declared by her ecclesiastical judges to be possessed of twelve devils, of which the chief were Satan, Belial, and Behemoth.

storm dragons. It is thus not easy to be certain what is, or is not, due to the Babylonian story in their mythologies.<sup>17</sup>

Just as the Christian abhorrence of the snake is due more to the story of the Fall and to serpent myths than to the reptile itself, so it is certain the Hebrew view of the sea is due to the Tiamat myth. In the Old Testament the ocean appears as a serpent monster, and nothing illustrates the omnipotence of God so much as His control of the sea (Ps. 93). The heavenly bodies and the sea are the two poles of created things. The Hebrew poet, looking up to the heavens, was awed (Ps. 8). The hosts of heaven are so silent (Ps. 19) and so orderly, each implicitly obeying God, by whom they are marshalled for service, and when He summons them by name not one is lacking (Isa. 40: 26; Ps. 147: 4). They rejoice to run their course, and thus the Heavens became the personification of order,<sup>18</sup> and God was called Jehovah of Hosts.<sup>19</sup> But when the poet looked down to the Mediterranean he was also awed, but by the opposite of this, for there, instead of a loving, obedient servant of God, he saw a rebellious dragon, conquered and chained, but still unrepentant.<sup>20</sup> God has brought the Sea into subjection and given it its bounds (Jer. 5: 22; Job 38: 8ff), but it refuses to be reconciled, and is continually raising its waves, its voice against Him (Ps. 93). He treads upon its arrogant waves, and reduces them to peace (Job 9: 8), but it is the peace of a sulking monster, which soon forgets its chastisement, and attempts again to avenge itself upon His people and His land, and its waves seem as if trying to reach the very heavens.<sup>21</sup> The Sea thus became the symbol of tumult and rebellion.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> In Egypt, the Desert, ever present and always seeking to engulf the land, was the symbol of evil, but the story of the struggle between Set-Typhon and the good gods contains elements borrowed from the Babylonian. The Aryans had their own and independent myths, and "the notion of serpent enemies of the bright gods runs through the mythology of all the Aryan peoples." (Cox, *Aryan Mythology*, II.: 351). The Tiamat story may be compared with the combat between Indra and Vritra, the "biting snake of darkness," or with the slaying of the Black snake Kalinak, the old serpent with a thousand heads, by Krishna, the Sun. (In Nepal, at the great snake festival, the people celebrate the victory of the serpent in the great struggle between Naga and Garuda, the foe of the serpent race. Crooke, II.: 146). The Greek myths show the same forms, but unmistakable traces of the Tiamat story sometimes show themselves, as would be expected, since the Greeks borrowed so much of the beginnings of their progress from Babylonian sources. A good example occurs in *Ælian*, *Var. Hist.* III.: 1, where Apollo, at the command of Zeus, slays the Python which was guarding the Oracle at Delphi, then in possession of the earth. (The name Python is possibly derived from the Semitic פתן). The Crusaders found the Tiamat myth in Palestine, and brought it with them to Britain, where, under the form of St. George and the Dragon, it has since been a favourite tale.

<sup>18</sup> Sheol is a place without any order (Job 10: 22).

<sup>19</sup> This name later received new significations.

<sup>20</sup> The old Hebrew view of the sea is very closely parallel to the Christian belief about Satan as seen in Milton. There is most probably a connection between them.

<sup>21</sup> Besides the rebellion of the Sea, the Talmud says that the earth rose up against the heavens, dissatisfied because her inhabitants must support themselves by the labour of their hands, while the inhabitants of heaven are nourished by the brilliancy of the Shekinah. (In the Greek myth the earth appears as the enemy of the sun.) Light and darkness were also at war with one another till God separated them and imposed peace. The darkness in the beginning was Sammael, the Angel of Death, which was enshrouding all things. (Weber, 194f.).

<sup>22</sup> This is what is referred to when it is said, "Reuben is turbulent as water." He will not be subject to rule, therefore he cannot prevail.



Another view of the sea also appeared in Babylonia. Because of the fertility which followed the abatement of the waters after an overflow, and especially from the recession of the Persian Gulf, which was continually, though gradually, giving up new soil, there arose the belief among some thinkers that the Ocean was the first of all things, from which the rest of creation sprang.<sup>23</sup> In the Creation Story in Genesis the same ideas are seen, but there the doctrine is modified and clarified. God in the beginning created all things, but at first there was merely Tehom, or Chaos, enshrouded in darkness. The next step was to dissipate this darkness, the stronghold of Chaos, and then the firmament was made in order to separate between the waters. This done, Tehom was commanded to give up the solid land, "Let the waters gather themselves together into one place, that the dry land may appear." This command had to be obeyed. The great Deep was thus brought within bounds (Jer. 5: 22), and God could then proceed with the creation of life upon the earth.

References to the dragon as a fabulous animal merely are few, and have already been noticed. Allusions to mythological dragons are more common, and it is especially the Tiamat myth which appears. In Job 7: 12, the patriarch irritably turns on God and demands, "Am I the Sea or the Tannin, that thou shouldest set a guard over me?" Here the sea is the image of the monster which requires to be kept under perpetual surveillance lest it break out and destroy, and Job querulously wonders if he has a wild, untameable nature like Tiamat, that he must be treated as she was, and hemmed in like the sea. The Tannin and Tiamat are here synonymous.

Job 26: 12, "He terrifieth the sea and smiteth through Rahab," is also the myth of Tiamat. Because of the proximity and constant influence of Egypt, the Egyptian name Rahab becomes the most frequent synonym for the dragon, but though the hands be the hands of Esau, the voice is Jacob's voice, the mythic background is always the Babylonian Tiamat. Rahab is here Tiamat, the Sea, the enemy who rages against God, but who is terrified into quietness by His power. The Fleeing Serpent of the following verse is not Kingú the lieutenant of Tiamat, but, as the context shows, it is the 'storm or eclipse dragon, the piercing of which makes and keeps the heavens bright.<sup>24</sup> Ps. 89: 10, 11, 26 also exhibits Rahab as the sea, the enemy of God which He in the plenitude of his power has conquered.

<sup>23</sup> Tiamat is before all the gods. She is represented as female, perhaps because she is the mother of all. In Hebrew **תהו** is feminine and **ים** is masculine. The legend that the first steps in civilization were given to the Babylonians by a dragon which issued from the sea is probably a later development from this. In some versions of the Tiamat myth one-half of her body is made into the firmament, the other into the solid land. It is from this source that Thales, an Asiatic and the first Greek philosopher, received the suggestion of his cosmological doctrines. It was from the Babylonian also that he learned how to predict eclipses.

<sup>24</sup> There is here no reference to the constellation of the Dragon.



Job 9: 13, where "the helpers of Rahab" are mentioned, is to be explained by v. 8, where God is said to tread on the high and proud waves (בְּמִתִּי) of the sea. Both verses express the same idea; but one is clothed in simple figurative language, the other in mythological. Tiamat had her helpers, who are represented as fighting bravely for her, and who in the first form of the story were probably the waves of the sea. In Ezek. 30: 8, "Egypt and her helpers" are spoken of, which is evidently the same expression as this, but with the ordinary name for Egypt used.

In Amos 9: 3 there occurs the strange prophecy, "Though they hide themselves from my sight in the bottom of the sea, from there I shall instruct the serpent and he will bite them." The serpent is paralleled in the following verse by the sword, concerning which the same language is used, which seems to imply that the expression is to be taken literally, and the serpent here may be nothing more than an ordinary serpent, a typical instrument of punishment represented as even penetrating the sea in search of its victim. There is possibly some mythical allusion, and at all events the connection between the sea and the serpent is clearly shown.

When Job can no longer restrain his impatience, he breaks forth with imprecations upon the day of his birth: "May those curse it, who curse the days, those who are skilful to stir up Leviathan" (Job 3: 8). Here the dragon Leviathan is the fleeing serpent of the sky, and Job desires that it may destroy the brightness of his birthday and render it unlucky, for an eclipse was always an evil omen. Doubtless the magicians claimed to have power to stir up this serpent.<sup>25</sup>

From its context, Leviathan in Ps. 74: 13, 14, is seen to be the Dragon of the Deep, here represented as many-headed. The sea and the *tanninim* are its parallels. Ps. 74: 12-23 and Ps. 89 are seemingly both connected with some creation hymn in which the story of Tiamat occupied a prominent place.

The prophets and the poets of Israel frequently liken the enemies of their land to these monsters. Isaiah was utterly opposed to any alliance with Egypt, and warned his fellow citizens against trusting to that land, whose help "is only wind and emptiness." "Therefore," he says, "have I called her רַהַב הַסִּיָּשֶׁת" (Isa. 30: 7). These words have been variously translated, but they evidently form one name, or epithet, applied to Egypt. The Massoretic pointing Rahab-hem-shebheth is certainly wrong. The right reading is

<sup>25</sup> Among all primitive peoples days were either lucky or unlucky; there are few neutral. Friday is still regarded by some as unlucky. Job by his curses may seek nothing more than to make his birthday a day of evil omen. Güntel to identify Leviathan with Tiamat would change רַהַב to רַיָּם; but such a change is unnecessary, since the context supplies the obvious reference.

possibly Rahab-ham-shobheth, Rahab-roaring-doing-nothing, and would mean that Egypt is a dragon who roars most loudly, giving promise of great powers to help its friends, but in the day of need does nothing. This would be a very fitting title for Egypt, and would describe well the part she so often played in the politics of Palestine.<sup>26</sup>

In Isaiah 51:9, Egypt is again named Rahab, and called a dragon. "Art thou not it that hewed Rahab in pieces, pierced the dragon and dried up the sea, the waters of the great *tehom*?" The reference is to the passage of the Red Sea, which, because of the regard in which the sea was held was always looked upon by the Hebrews as the greatest act in their redemption from Egypt. Yet it is redolent of the myth. Tiamat was pierced through and cut in pieces by Merodach, just as the waters of the great Deep were dried up.

Ezekiel 29:3, 32:2, calls Egypt a *tannim* that lieth in the midst of the rivers, a *tannim* of the seas. The foundation form of this monster is, however, the crocodile. Güntel seeks to find here also the Tiamat story, because the tannim claims he had made the river for himself. Such a claim could not, he says, be made by Pharaoh, and therefore the writer is referring to Tiamat. The singular יִאֲרִי is evidently a Massoretic misreading for the plural יִאֲרִי (cf. v. 4) arising out of the use of the singular in the parallel passage in v. 9; and must mean the canals and irrigation channels, which Pharaoh could easily claim as his own work.

The historical reference of Isaiah 27:1 is not clear: "In that day Yahweh shall visit with his hard, and great, and strong sword Leviathan the fleeing serpent, and Leviathan the tortuous serpent, and he shall slay the tannin which is in the sea." These names have usually been applied to three different powers, of which the tannin was Egypt, but there is great divergence of opinion as to what powers are represented by the two Leviathans. Compared with ch. 24:21, it does not seem necessary to postulate three different dragons, or even two, the three expressions are merely the emphatic repetition of the one idea. (Cf. Cheyne, Comm.) The verse is full of the myth. The sword is the cherubim sword turning every way, so that even the fleeing, tortuous Leviathan cannot escape it; it is the lightning sword of Merodach with which he pierced the dragon. As the fleeing serpent in Job 26:13 is certainly the serpent of the sky, it may be that the writer here draws from both myths, but the one name would readily be applied to different monsters.

<sup>26</sup> Isaiah seems to like names of this kind, and Maher-shalal-hash-baz is a close parallel (Isa. 8:1). MacCurdy (Hist. Proph. Mon. II.:431) suggests as the probable reading Rahab-hammashbith, "Rahab who brings to nought."

Nebuchadrezzar (Jer. 51:34) is called a tannin because of his voracity for conquest: "He hath swallowed us up like a tannin, he hath filled his belly with my dainties." The tannin here is simply a fabulous serpent monster, and there is no mythical allusion.

The seraphim are undoubtedly connected with the serpent, or dragon. The name is applied only once to divine attendants (Isa. 6: 2ff). The same name is given to the serpents which attacked the Israelites in the wilderness, which is probably the reason the name is not given more frequently to supernatural beings. In Greek mythology the dragons are not necessarily evil. They are the clear-sighted ones,<sup>27</sup> and there are many instances related of their ministering to divine heroes. The Semitic conception was probably the same, and the seraphim, who are represented as being colossal in size, are the bright ones, the dragons of the gods. In the vision of Isaiah the divine attendants naturally take a form which is already in the consciousness of the seer. The main characteristic of the seraphim is their flying power, and for this each had six wings. The flying serpent (Isa. 14: 29) is also a saraph, and it would thus seem that in zoölogy the saraph is a flying serpent, in theology it is a flying heavenly being, and the one is certainly connected with the other. The Seraphim form the body-guard of the Lord, standing about His throne and guarding the holy palace, performing the functions which are most frequently ascribed to the serpent. It may therefore be regarded as certain that the popular, mythic saraph which lies behind, and conditions the conception of the prophet, was a serpent-dragon of one kind or another. As the extra-biblical cherub was evidently the storm-cloud, or its dragon (Ps. 18: 10, 11; Ezek. 28: 14), hence, from its name, the saraph is most likely the serpent-like lightning.

The Dragon's Well (עֵין הַתַּנִּין, Neh. 2: 13) must have been a spring or fountain with which some legend of a dragon was connected, in what relation cannot now be ascertained.

<sup>27</sup> The root of the name is δράκειν, to see.



